

## **Reading Fluency for Adolescents: Should We Care?**

by Timothy Rasinski, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio

For years, reading fluency has been the neglected goal of the reading program (Allington, 1983). Schools, teachers, school administrators, textbook authors, teacher preparation programs, and others simply did not view reading fluency as an important issue for reading education. Fluency was viewed as either oral reading or reading rate, neither of which was considered important in students' reading development. However, with the publication of the Report of the National Reading Panel (National Reading Panel, 2000), reading fluency was thrust back into the spotlight. Fluency was identified as one of five instructional factors, proved by empirical research, to be critical to students' overall reading development.

Other reviews of research on reading fluency (e.g., Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003) have shown that fluency is an important goal for reading. The focus of the National Reading Panel, however, was on the primary grades—K to 3. Jeanne Chall's (1996) seminal model of reading development confirmed this perception when she placed fluency development firmly within the realm of the primary grades.

Fluency for upper elementary and the middle grades? Forget about it. Upper elementary and middle grade teachers have bigger fish to fry, right? Wrong! If we are interested in reading achievement even beyond the primary grades, then reading fluency must be an issue that needs to be considered well into adolescence.

What is fluency? It is the ability to read the words on the printed page accurately, effortlessly, or automatically so that readers can preserve their limited cognitive resources for the more important task in reading—comprehension—and with appropriate prosody or expression so as to give meaning to the words that is implied through emphasis, phrasing, and intonation.

Fluency is important in reading because it is the gateway to comprehension. You have to have some degree of fluency in order to understand what you read. Many readers do not comprehend well, not because they lack intelligence, but because they read the text disfluently, making word recognition errors, laboring in their reading, and reading without appropriate expression. In a paper on helping students with significant reading comprehension problems, Duke, Pressley, and Hilden (2004) estimate that 75 to 90 percent of students with comprehension difficulties have reading fluency problems that are a significant cause of their comprehension difficulties.

A study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (Pinnell, Pikulski, Wixson, Campbell, Gough, & Beatty, 1995) found that fluency, whether measured in terms of word recognition automaticity or expression, was strongly associated with silent reading comprehension for fourth grade students. Moreover, nearly half of all fourth

graders were found to lack even a minimal level of reading fluency. A recent replication of the study (Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman, & Orange, 2005) found much the same results—reading fluency is significantly related to overall reading achievement for students beyond the primary grades, and a significant number of these students lack even basic reading fluency skills. My own work in reading diagnosis and remediation at the Kent State University reading clinic finds that fluency is key to reading success and that many of our struggling older readers are not very fluent in their reading.

Indeed, a recent study of fluency among high school students in an urban school district (Rasinski, Padak, McKeon, Krug-Wilfong, Friedauer, & Heim, 2005) found that fluency was strongly associated with students' performance on the high school graduation test and that well over half of the students assessed could be considered disfluent. More than 10 percent of the students assessed read at a rate less than 100 words per minute—a rate normally associated with primary grade readers! Fluency is indeed an issue whose time has come—for older students as well as younger students.

How Should Fluency Be Taught?

So if fluency is important, how is it best taught to older students? I suggest that three components of fluency instruction be considered by teachers. I call it the MAP approach.

**Modeling.** The first component is modeling. Students need to hear fluent reading so that they can develop an internal sense of fluency. This, then, is another reason for teachers (and others) to read to students. When teachers read to their students and then talk about their reading with students, they help students develop a metacognitive idea of what is meant by fluency—it's more than just reading fast; it's reading with appropriately fast speed with meaningful expression.

**Assistance.** Secondly, students lacking fluency in their reading need appropriate assistance while reading. This assistance is best done when students read and simultaneously hear someone read the same text with them. This person can be a teacher, parent, or other adult reading with the student. It can be an older student or a peer partner reading with the student. It can even involve the student reading while listening to a prerecorded version of the passage. When the reader visually examines the words and phrases while simultaneously hearing the words and phrases read to him or her, the sight and sound of the printed text is more likely to get locked into the reader's head, and thus more easily and fluently retrieved when encountered at a later time.

**Practicing.** Finally, fluency is fostered by the student practicing his or her reading. A special kind of practice is called for, however—the kind of repetitive practice that athletes and musicians engage in—rehearsal or repeated reading of a text. We need to ask students to read and reread relatively short passages until fluency is achieved. Several research studies have demonstrated that repeated readings of

texts lead not only to improved reading of the passages read, but also to improvements in fluency and comprehension of passages never before seen. When that happens, students are truly improving their reading.

Getting students to practice a passage repeatedly may present its own challenge. Students need to have a reason to repeatedly practice a passage. One very authentic reason is performance—readers are more likely to practice a passage so that it can be read with appropriate accuracy, speed, and meaningful expression if they know they will be reading the passage to someone else, an audience. Thus, performance is perfect motivation for students to practice and gain fluency.

Certain types of passages are meant to be performed (and practiced). These involve material written with a sense of voice and include scripts (reader's theater), dialogues, monologues, poetry, song lyrics, speeches and rhetoric, jokes, chants, cheers, letters, and journal entries. Interestingly, even though these are very legitimate forms of reading and writing, they have been largely overlooked in schools today. Research is accumulating that demonstrates that reading, rereading, and performing these types of materials does lead to improved fluency, comprehension, and enjoyment of reading.

We all know that students love to perform in school. What we are learning is that this reading performance also leads to improved reading, and to a greater appreciation for these often overlooked genres of performance reading material. Indeed, in some classrooms, the lure of performance leads students to writing their own scripts, monologues, dialogues, poetry, song lyrics, and speeches that they then practice and perform.

Modeling, assistance, and practice are keys to developing fluency in any human endeavor that requires fluency—and this is particularly true for reading fluency. For a more in-depth discussion of how to teach fluency, I recommend my book *The Fluent Reader* (Rasinski, 2003) as well as other materials that have come out on fluency in the past several years.

Fluency is increasingly recognized as a key to success in reading, and many older and younger students are not fluent readers. Fluency can and should be taught into the adolescent grades, especially for struggling readers. The MAP strategy is an effective starting place to make fluency instruction effective for all students.

<http://ohiorc.org/adlit/inperspective/issue/2006-09/Article/feature.aspx>